# Common App Essay Info

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| **Main Essay** | *Number:* just one personal purpose statement for the entire Common Application | *Length:* between 250 and 650 words | *Purpose:* this essay answers one of Common App's prompts and is sent to all colleges you apply to through the Common App | *Flexibility:* once submitted to a school, that version is locked for that college, but you can edit and resubmit a new version to any school you haven't applied to yet |
| **Supplemental Essay** | *Number:* varies by school – some require none, others require one or more | *What they are:* shorter essays required by individual colleges in addition to the Common App essay | | |

# Common App Main Essay Prompts for 2026–2027

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

# Let's get into the Prompts

| Theme | Best fit for | What officers want | What fails | What works |
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| **1. background, identity, interest, talent** | something integral to who you are that wouldn't show up elsewhere | -something authentic to your experience, not a resume entry<br><br>-evidence of how the background or interest has shaped your thinking<br><br>-specific scenes and details rather than abstract claims<br><br>-genuine uniqueness, not generic identity statements | -generic identity essays that could be anyone ("! Come from a supportive family")<br><br>-resume expansion (restating what activities already show)<br><br>-claiming membership in a culture without demonstrating how it shaped you<br><br>-exotic-seeming backgrounds presented as fully resolved | -a specific ritual, tradition, or practice with concrete sensory detail<br><br>-an identity that shapes how you see intellectual problems<br><br>-a talent the reader can picture you doing<br><br>-the quiet way a background has shaped decisions you make |
| **2. challenge, setback, failure** | a specific moment of difficulty and how you changed | -a real moment with specific details, not a category of hardship<br><br>-evidence of change, not just endurance<br><br>-honesty about what stayed difficult<br><br>-reflection that doesn't resolve too neatly | -tragedy recounted as tribute to your own resilience<br><br>-sports losses with a rote "hard work pays off" lesson<br><br>-the most marketable version of adversity rather than the most honest<br><br>-resolutions where the writer sounds fully healed and enlightened | -a specific moment where you can pinpoint the shift<br><br>-honest acknowledgement of what the setback cost you<br><br>-a lesson that is concrete, not generic<br><br>-evidence your response to the setback reshaped how you act now |

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| **3. questioning a belief or idea** | a time you pushed back on something you'd been taught | -a belief you genuinely held, not one you never believed<br><br>-a specific moment or encounter that prompted the questioning<br><br>-real, intellectual movement, not a rehearsed conversion<br><br>-engagement with the discomfort of revising your view | -political ranting against opposing views<br><br>- conversion-to-obvious-correct-view narratives<br><br>- stating the belief you questioned in straw-man form<br><br>-resolutions where you emerge certain again, just about a different belief | -a belief tied to specific upbringing, community, or education<br><br>-a moment that made the belief hard to hold intact<br><br>-acknowledging what the old belief had going for it<br><br>-ending somewhere between the old and new position, or with new questions |
| **4. gratitude for something done for you** | a specific act that meaningfully affected you | -a specific small act, not a grand sacrifice<br><br>-what made the kindness surprising<br><br>-what you learned about yourself or the other person<br><br>-how the gratitude changed your behavior or outlook | -tribute essays to parents, teachers, or coaches<br><br>-grand acts of kindness everyone recognizes as kind<br><br>-gratitude without surprise<br><br>-gratitude that reflects well on the writer but barely mentions the other person | -a small specific moment that didn't have to happen<br><br>-the other person's interior captured on the page<br><br>-the delay between the act and recognition of what it meant<br><br>-gratitude that lead to a concrete change in how you treat others |
| **5. accomplishment or realization** | growth moment that shifted your self-understanding | -a before-and-after contrast in your self-understanding<br><br>-specific evidence of new perspective, not just a claim of growth<br><br>-an accomplishment with honest limits, not universal triumph<br><br>-growth that's visible in the prose itself, not just stated in summary | -achievement-victory essays where growth is tacked on<br><br>-generic realizations ("I learned hard work matters")<br><br>-claims of growth without behavioral evidence<br><br>-essays that end with the writer sounding wiser than is plausible | -a moment where your self-model broke in a useful way<br><br>-new understanding that led to concrete, different action<br><br>-acknowledging what you got wrong before the shift<br><br>-an accomplishment reframed as the start of new questions, not the end |

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| **6. topic that makes you lose track of time** | genuine intellectual passion with evidence | -genuine, specific engagement with the topic in the prose<br><br>-evidence of real depth (reading, watching, building, discussing)<br><br>-a personal angle on why this topic pulls you<br><br>-named sources, people, or moments that deepened your interest | -popular topics written about abstractly (space, climate, AI) without specific expertise<br><br>-topic interest presented without behavior showing the interest<br><br>-stating "I love learning" without naming what you learn<br><br>-curiosity described rather than demonstrated | -a specific niche inside a bigger topic (not "math" but "Diophantine equations")<br><br>-named resources: a specific book, paper, podcast, teacher<br><br>-a scene showing you engaged with the topic<br><br>-connection to your track record (a project, a club, self-directed work) |
| **7. open topic** | any essay you want to write (high flexibility, high risk) | ***When to use Prompt 7:***<br><br>-you have an essay that responds to no specific prompt but represents you<br><br>-your best material needs a non-standard frame<br><br>-you want to experiment with form (hybrid essay, reverse chronology, thematic structure) | ***When to skip Prompt 7:***<br><br>-you're trying to recycle an essay written for a different school<br><br>-you don't have a clear reason not to use prompts 1 through 6<br><br>-you think "open" means "easier" | -essays that seem to fit Prompt 1 through 6 but were placed under 7 out of habit<br><br>-essays where the writer wants to avoid the reflection required by other prompts<br><br>-experimental form without content to support it<br><br>-confession essays (past crimes, mental health crises framed as the main subject) |

# How to Write a Great Essay

1. **Brainstorm** (very important, maybe MOST important step)
2. **Structure your essay according to your topic.**
3. **Draft. Revise. Repeat**

# How to Pick Your Prompt

## A Simple process:

-draft a list of 5 to 7 concrete moments from your life that you remember vividly
-for each moment, ask which prompt it answers most naturally
-if a moment fits two or three prompts, that's a strong sign of workable material
-pick the prompt that forces the most reflection on your moment, not the least

*A good test: can you write a specific paragraph answering the prompt in 10 minutes, with real details? If yes, that's your prompt. If not, try a different angle.

*Another test: would this essay surprise someone who already read your activities list and recommendations? If yes, your topic is working. If it repeats what they've already seen, find a different story.

# Cliches that Sink Common App Essays

## Topics that typically don't work:

-the big sports win or loss
-the performance, solo, or lead role
-the mission trip or international volunteer experience
-the immigration essay with a standard arc (moved, felt out of place, accepted heritage)
-a grandparent's death as the setup for gratitude or growth
-climate change, travel, or "my passion for learning" without specificity
-political essays that rant at opposing views
-confession essays (past crimes, mental health crises written to shock)

*What these share: they're topics where the writer's individual version is easy to confuse with hundreds of others. A strong, specific angle on any of them can still work. A default approach cannot.

*If you're drawn to one of these topics, ask what version of it nobody else could write. That's the one to pursue.

# What Admissions Officers Really Read For

**Who is this person? Can this person Write? Will this person contribute something of value to our campus?**

-***Authenticity***: The essay sounds like a real student, not a performance of what a college applicant is supposed to sound like.

- ***Specificity***: Concrete details (names, places, exact words) beat abstract claims.

- ***Reflection***: Evidence the writer thought about what an experience meant, not just what happened.

- ***Voice Consistency***: The essays register matches the short answers, recommendations, and supplementals.

- ***Passion or Empathy***: The two qualities most often cited by admissions officers as what they're looking for.

*What they're NOT looking for: polish without substance, grand claims, resume expansion, or proof of maturity. They have grades and transcripts to assess growth over time. The essay is for voice. AI for topic generation and draft-level feedback is increasingly normalized. ***AI as a ghostwriter is risky, both for detection reasons and for the voice mismatch it creates across your full application.***

# Editing from 800 down to 650 Words

*First drafts of Common App essays run 750 to 900 words for most students. The 650-word limit is non-negotiable. Editing down is where the essay usually gets stronger.

**Cuts that almost always help:**

-the setup paragraph (most essays start two paragraphs late)
-the closing paragraph that summarizes the point of the essay
-Meta-language ("I want to tell you about…")
-adjectives and adverbs that don't carry weight ("incredibly," "truly", "absolutely")
-the second example when one is enough
-backstory paragraphs that don't serve the moment

*A useful cut pass: read your first paragraph out loud. If your essay would make sense starting from the second paragraph, delete the first. Do the same for the closing.

*The Common App trims exactly at 650 words. Written overage does not reach the reader. If your essay is 680 words, the last 30 words are gone. Your reader gets a mid-sentence cutoff instead of a closing.